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Coastal California Gnatcatcher

What is the coastal California gnatcatcher?

The coastal California gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila californica californica*) is a small non-migratory songbird that inhabits the coastal sage scrubland communities of southwestern California and northwestern Baja California, Mexico. It has dark blue-gray and grayish white plumage, with the male distinctively identified by its black cap which is absent during the winter months.

The gnatcatcher occurs almost exclusively in the coastal sage community, but can be occasionally found in chaparral and riparian habitats. Coastal sage scrub vegetation is composed of relatively low-growing, dry season deciduous, and succulent plants.

The breeding season of the gnatcatcher extends from late February through July, with peak of nesting activities occurring from mid-March through mid-May. They usually use grasses, bark strips, small leaves, spider webs, feather down, and other raw materials to make their nests. Nests are constructed over a 2-10 day period with both sexes participating in all phases of the nesting cycle. The incubation and nesting period lasts for 14-16 days, however juveniles remain closely associated with their parents for several months following their departure from the nests.

Why is the coastal California gnatcatcher threatened?

The gnatcatcher population has undergone a precipitous decline during the last several decades as its habitat has been destroyed by urban development and, agricultural conversion. It is dependent for breeding on coastal sage scrub, and as that plant community has vanished, the gnatcatcher population has dwindled with it.

Gnatcatcher population have also been decimated by the proliferation of the brown-headed cowbird, a nest parasite, whose range has expanded as Southern California land has been cleared and developed.

What is being done to save the coastal California gnatcatcher?

The coastal California gnatcatcher was listed as a threatened species under the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) on March 25, 1993. Since then a number of locally sponsored efforts have been initiated to address the loss of coastal sage scrub and declining gnatcatcher populations.

Extensive planning efforts are currently underway throughout southern California. These planning efforts were designed to identify remaining suitable habitat and implement conservation strategies through local and regional programs to protect the gnatcatcher. Many of these planning efforts are a direct result of the Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) program.

What is the NCCP program?

In 1991, the State of California Resources Agency established the NCCP program to specifically address the loss of the coastal sage scrub community and the gnatcatcher. The objectives of the NCCP program involve working with local governments and landowners to identify and protect habitat in sufficient amounts and distributions that will enable long-term conservation of the coastal sage community as well as other sensitive habitat types. These objectives will be achieved through the implementation of permanent conservation strategies, which includes the development of a preserve system that encompasses sensitive habitats such as coastal sage scrub, chaparral, and a mosaic of other natural vegetation communities.

Some of the regional plans developed as a part of the NCCP program include the Multiple Species Conservation Plan for the City of San Diego, the Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan for Riverside County, and the Orange County Central and Coastal Subregion Natural Communities Conservation Program/Habitat Conservation Plan.

What happens when a species is listed as endangered or threatened by the Federal government?

Federal law prohibits “taking” of an endangered or threatened species - this includes activities that would harass, harm, or kill the listed species. Such actions can include habitat destruction that might affect a species through disruption of normal breeding, feeding, or sheltering activities. The ESA includes two sections that authorize incidental take in the case of otherwise legal activities. Any legal non-federal activity, such as building a home or roadway, that involves take of listed species, can be done if it is adequately addressed in a habitat conservation plan (HCP) and authorized under the terms of an incidental take permit issued under section 10(a) of the ESA.

The ESA and associated implementing regulations also require Federal agencies to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service when proposed federal actions may affect listed species. Section 7 of the ESA determines the conditions under which incidental take can occur.

Who is affected by the “taking” prohibition?

The “taking” prohibition applies to the activities of public agencies, private enterprises, and individuals. As described above, exceptions to the prohibition are available through the section 10(a) permit and section 7 consultation provisions of the ESA.

Who is affected by the section 7 consultation requirement?

The consultation requirement is triggered by any involvement of a Federal agency in a project that may affect listed species. This involvement can include Federal grants or funding for the project, implementation of the project, or issuance of a Federal permit (e.g., 404 permit from the Army Corps of Engineers). The consultation occurs on a case-by-case basis, separate from other permit requirements for the project.

Who can apply for a section 10(a) permit?

A section 10(a) permit can be issued for individual projects that will affect listed species or for large areas involving multiple species, jurisdictions, and development activities. In all cases, the permit application must be accompanied by a “Habitat Conservation Plan” that demonstrates how impacts of the taking will be minimized and what will be

done to ensure the species’ survival. In addition, the NCCP plans must satisfy the same criteria as an HCP. Because of the scale of the required conservation measures, applications typically cover areas that involve more than one project. In these cases, the permit is usually held by a local agency with land-use authority over the area within their jurisdiction.

What is required for a section 10(a) permit?

Application for a section 10(a) permit must be accompanied by the following attachments:

1. A complete description of the activity for which the permit is being sought.
2. The common and scientific names of the species to be covered by the permit.
3. A “Habitat Conservation Plan”.

The “Habitat Conservation Plan” must specify:

- a. The impact which will likely result from the taking of the species.
- b. Steps the applicant will take to monitor, minimize and mitigate such impacts.
- c. The level and source of funding available to implement such steps.
- d. Procedures that will be used to deal with unforeseen circumstances.
- e. The names of the responsible party or parties.
- f. Alternative actions to the taking and the reasons why they were not selected.

In summary, the HCP must demonstrate that it will provide for the species in a way that will not jeopardize the continued survival and recovery of the species in the wild. The recovery of the coastal California gnatcatcher is primarily dependant upon the conservation and management of the species habitat and populations.



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